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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: UN TEAM TO SHINKOLOBWE: MINE NOT A PROLIFERATION THREAT BUT SHOULD STAY CLOSED

REF: KINSHASA 611

¶1. (U) A UN team, composed of officials from IAEA, UNEP and WHO, visited Shinkolobwe mine in Katanga Province from Oct 25 to Nov 04 and concluded that the mine should remain closed due to risks of mine collapse and potential chronic exposure to ionising radiation. The objective of the trip was to determine mine safety and health hazards to former workers, and not a safeguards and proliferation assessment. A UN press release announced the mine was vacated and no evidence of uranium mining was found. Although the mine was unstable and subject to additional cave-ins, team member Alain Pasche, stated to UN press, "No immediate risks to the environment were observed, though we have taken samples of water, soil and sediments, which will be further analysed in Switzerland for heavy metal concentrations."

¶2. (SBU) IAEA safeguards officer Bernard Weiss told econoff in a phone conversation on Oct 29 that IAEA sent a safeguards assessment team to Shinkolobwe in May 2004. The safeguards assessment team concluded there was not a safeguards/proliferation risk from the mine. He did note that the higher than normal levels of radiation at Shinkolobwe are to be expected due to the presence of natural uranium and other heavy metals in the area. Although this does not pose a proliferation risk, it could pose an alpha radiation health hazard for the workers who breathed mine dust on a daily basis. This assessment mirrors the USG assessment in March 2004 (reftel).

¶3. (SBU) Comment: Hype about Shinkolobwe, where the uranium for the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs was mined, is largely created by a sensationalist press. Both USG and IAEA have determined that there is not a nuclear safeguards or proliferation risk from Shinkolobwe. The artisanal miners have been removed from the mine. The UN team and local mining sector contacts report that all mining has stopped. Although miners previously at Shinkolobwe might be at higher risk for health problems due to inhalation of radioactive dust, naturally elevated levels of radioactivity should not be confused with proliferation of highly radioactive substances.
End comment.

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